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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

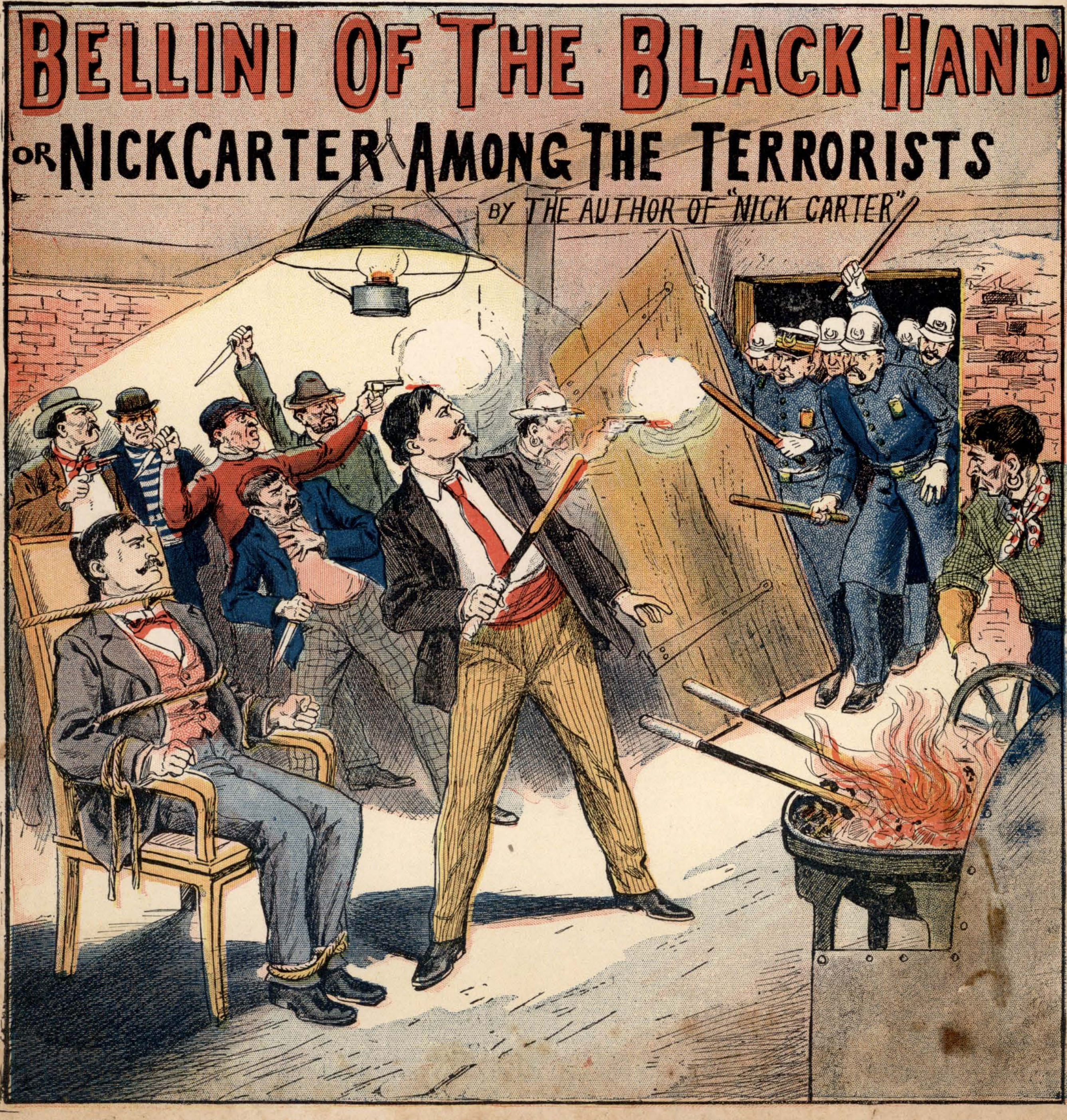
Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

No. 471 NEW YORK, JANUARY 6, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

BELLINI OF THE BLACK HAND

OR NICK CARTER AMONG THE TERRORISTS

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



There was a loud crash behind them all, and at the same instant the heavy door fell into the room.

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BELLINI, OF THE BLACK HAND

OR,

Nick Carter Among the Terrorists.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A HYDRA-HEADED MONSTER.

"Carter, this Black-Hand business must be stopped."

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Commissioner," replied the great detective, leaning back in his chair and applying a lighted match to the cigar which the police commissioner had just given him.

"A few days ago," continued the head of the department of police of the city of New York, "I called the captains, the inspectors, and the deputy commissioners together to meet me in consultation on the subject, and the consensus of opinion of that meeting was that you are the man best adapted to perform this miracle."

"I am sure that I'm quite obliged for their good opinion," murmured the detective.

"Do you think you can do it?"

"You do—evidently. That is sufficient, isn't it?"

"Yes—for I see that you have no doubts on the subject."

"Commissioner," said Nick, straightening up in his chair and speaking very earnestly, "I never permit myself to doubt myself. There are people in the world who would call that trait one of egotism; but it is not."

"Still, Nick, it is rather a large proposition to break up the Society of the Black Hand. It has as many offshoots as a Balm of Gilead tree; it sprouts up everywhere. In fact, it is my own personal opinion that there are scores of groups of men who are banded together under that name in different parts of the city—and of the entire country as well—which in reality have no relation whatever one with another."

The detective shook his head slowly.

"You are right, and you are wrong also," he said.

"Explain that remark. How can I be both right and wrong at the same time?"

"You will understand that I am only expressing an opinion?"

"Certainly."

"Very well; I think you are right in asserting that there are scores of different groups of men who are banded together under that name, and that you are also right when you express it as your belief that they have no direct relations one with another; but you are, I think, entirely wrong if by that you mean that they do not work together."

"I see what you imply."

"A moment ago you used the simile of a Balm of Gilead tree, and I think it was a good one. Let us look at it a moment. You plant a Balm of Gilead tree in the middle of your lawn—or let us say that you transplant it there. Suppose you go away and leave it for two years? When you return, you will find that you have a grove of those trees on your lawn."

"Precisely."

"The roots shoot out from the original tree, and here and there for hundreds of feet on every side, sprouts from those roots start to the surface, break through, and become—so far as the eye can see—individual trees. They grow rapidly. They became as large, sometimes larger, than the mother tree, and yet there is nothing on the surface to indicate that they are not individual trees, each independent of all the others.

"But the fact is, commissioner, that every tree in that grove of trees is connected with the original tree, and that each tree there is bound to every other tree around it. It is a hydra-headed monster which may totally destroy your lawn unless you utterly destroy every root. They are individuals in one sense, but they are closely associated in another.

"I believe it is just so with the Black Hand."

"I suppose you mean that under the surface every one of these societies is associated with all the others; eh?"

"Yes; just like the Balm of Gilead trees."

"Well, that brings me back to my original idea."

"What was that?"

"Why, if you do succeed in lopping off one head of this hydra-headed monster, there will be scores of heads left, and the mere destruction of one will not affect the others any more than the death of one house-fly interferes with its associates."

"Quite true; but, all the same, if that one head is not cut off too quickly, there is the possibility that every head in the outfit may be reached through knowledge of that one."

"Eh? By Jove, Nick! I wonder if I understand you correctly?"

"Probably you do."

"Do you mean that you would go in for becoming a member of the Black Hand yourself?"

"Exactly that; and a little more than that, also."

"What more than that?"

"Only that I should have my chief assistant, Chick, do exactly the same thing—with a different group, you understand."

"You would both start out to become members of the Black Hand?"

"Yes."

"In different sections of the country?"

"Of the country, or of the city; certainly in different localities."

"I understand you now. It will be a frightful danger to incur, Nick."

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"We won't stop now to consider that part of it," he said.

"Will you undertake the job, Nick?"

"Yes; I have more than once thought of suggesting it to you that I should do so."

"It is a big proposition."

"I know that."

"And an extremely dangerous one."

"Certainly."

"But you will undertake it?"

"I have said that I will."

"I can't say how pleased I am, Nick, at your decision."

"Commissioner, I will have to make two or three conditions."

"You are free to make any conditions that please you, Nick."

"Then here they are: First, you are to be the only individual connected with the police department who is to know that I am having anything whatever to do with the matter."

"But my captains, inspectors, and——"

"Must be informed that I have declined the job."

"Eh? Is that so, positively?"

"Absolutely. My connection with the case must not get beyond your own cognizance."

"All right. I agree."

"Second: I am to have absolutely a free hand in the matter."

"Of course, I consent to that."

"But you don't yet understand what I mean by that remark."

"Then explain it."

"I will report to you only when I see fit to do so. Unless I do report to you, you will not ask me for a report of any kind."

"Oh, that is all right, too."

"I may be a week, or a month, or a year on the case."

"So long as that?"

"Commissioner, I propose to work through the roots we have been talking about. I intend, before I cut off one of the heads, to know positively where all the other heads are located. I shall not strike a blow until I know that I am prepared to strike a hundred, or a thousand blows at almost the same instant. I shall not cut off one head until I know that I can cut all the others off, as well."

"That is a big job, Nick."

"Yes; and it will take time and ceaseless energy to accomplish it."

"Sure."

"And, in the meantime, I must be left severely alone."

"That is agreed."

"Well, now, the third condition is this: I want you to spur the policemen of every precinct to renewed energy against the Black Hand while I am at work."

"You want them to keep humping, eh?"

"I do; and with more gee whiz than ever."

"That shall be done, too."

"Call your captains and the others together again. Tell them that I have declined to undertake the case. You can say that I have an important matter on hand now—they need not understand that the important case is this same one."

"Certainly not."

"In the meantime, I shall disappear."

"Eh? Disappear?"

"Exactly."

"Where to, Nick?"

"Not even the commissioner will know that."

"All right. I am beginning to get onto your scheme."

"While I am at work, there will, doubtless, be many more Black-Hand outrages."

"I suppose so. I fear so."

"And my fourth condition is this: You must not look to me to prevent a single one of those outrages while I am at work. Your police must undertake to do that."

"I don't suppose you will actually take part in any of them, will you, Nick?" the commissioner asked, with a smile.

"I may be obliged to do so."

"And run the chance of arrest by one of my men, eh?"

"Oh, I'll take that chance," with a laugh.

"Very well; I accept your four conditions. Are there any more?"

"No; but there is something that I wish you to do."

"What is that?"

"I want you to call upon the manager of the telephone company, in Dey Street, and make arrangements with him to have a private wire stretched from some vacant room in the top of this building to a place which I will select—a wire which will have no connection with any other wire, or with any exchange—and I want you to keep a thoroughly trustworthy man, or woman, at that wire, night and day, who will be prepared at any moment to convey a message to you, and to you only. In that way I can communicate with you whenever I please."

"I can do that, too. Where will the other end of the wire be located?"

"I don't know—yet. I will let you know. Somewhere in one of the Italian colonies, I suppose."

"All right. Tell me what you wish done, and when you want it done, and it shall be attended to at once."

"And you will understand that, whatever message you receive over that wire, will come from me alone?"

"Yes."

"And, no matter what that message may be, you will carry out its suggestions to the letter, with no deviations or corrections?"

"Yes, Nick."

"Then I think we will succeed in breaking up the Black Hand."

CHAPTER II.

NICK CARTER AGAINST THE BLACK HAND.

"It would be a source of great pleasure to me, Nick, if you would give me some idea of how you intend to work this thing," said the commissioner.

The detective was silent a moment, and then he replied:

'No, commissioner. It is best that I should not do so. Understand, my reluctance is not from any lack of confidence in you, but it is rather to save you from any of the dangers which might arise. What you don't know won't hurt you."

"I suppose that is true."

"I would prefer to work alone. That is, with the help of my assistants. Our communications with each other will be over the telephone. Other than that, I think we need make no arrangements."

"How shall I call you up, if I should wish to speak to you?" asked the commissioner.

"You will never, under any circumstances, call me up over that phone," was the quick reply.

"Oh! I did not understand that."

"You must never, under any circumstances, attempt to get in communication with me at all while I am engaged on this case."

"But, if something should happen——"

"No matter what happens."

"That is absolute, eh?"

"Absolutely so. The person you place at this end of the telephone, whether man or woman, must remain there night and day; must sleep there, with the bell so arranged that, when I press the button at my end, it will make noise enough to rouse a sleeping giant—but there will be no bell at my end. You can find such a person as I describe, can't you?"

"Yes; I have one in mind now—a young woman."

"I think a woman will attend to this better than a man."

"So do I."

"Instruct her that, when the bell rings, she is to take the receiver, and through the phone will reply, 'On deck!' After that, I will repeat what I have to say, very slowly, and she is to remember it all, and to repeat it to you, when you are entirely alone, save with her, word for word, as nearly as possible. She is to write nothing down."

"All right."

"In referring to you, I will use the name, 'Pete.'"

"Very good."

"If I say to her, 'Tell Pete at once,' et cetera, she is to drop everything, no matter what hour of the day or night it may be, and go to you with the message."

"That's understood."

"If I say, 'Tell Pete, when you see him,' et cetera, it will be sufficient for her to deliver the message when she next sees you."

"Yes."

"She must take her meals in that room, and sleep there. You can supply her with reading matter, and with other things to help her pass the time."

"I'll fix that part of it, all right."

"She must never be absent from that room for more than ten minutes at a time, unless she leaves it to take a message from me to you. I will then understand, of course, that she is absent for a time."

"Yes."

"When I have perfected my plans—that is, when I have made up my mind just where I wish to have the other end of that wire located, I will send Patsy, or Ten-Ichi, to you, with full verbal instructions. Those you will take to the manager of the telephone company, and give them to him verbally, also."

"I understand."

"And you will also caution him to send out one or two of his very best and most reliable men to do the work, and that, when they are doing it, they must work as secretly as possible. It would be well if they could conceal the fact that they are stretching a new wire, and could, somehow, give the impression that they are engaged only in making repairs."

"That will be easy."

"Not so easy as you think, if they have to run the wire into an Italian colony."

"I suppose not."

"There will be spies on every hand, to report what they are doing—and to investigate it. You realize that?"

"Certainly."

"I take all these precautions because, from the moment I appear among the Italians, I will be spied upon until they are thoroughly satisfied that I am what I appear to be."

"Of course you will. And your life would not be worth a moment's purchase if once they should even suspect you."

"No; I would get a knife in my back instantly."

"You intend, then, to make yourself one of them?"

"Certainly."

"Can you do it, Nick, without imminent danger of discovery?"

"I have done it before; I think I can do it again."

"You speak Italian perfectly, I suppose?"

"I speak it as well as a native; and, what is better, I speak almost all of their dialects. There are a great many of them, you know."

"I have heard so."

"More than in any other language."

"Suppose, Nick, that anything should happen to your wire? Suppose you should find that, for some reason which we cannot now anticipate, you could not communicate with me in that way, and you should have to find some other means. What would you do in a case of that kind?"

"That is well thought of. If I have any occasion to send any message to you other than over the telephone, you will know that it is from me, if you see on the paper the outline of a hand with the letter N in the center of the palm."

"Good! I will remember that."

"And, if it should be a verbal message——"

"Yes."

"My messenger will ask you, 'Did you ever see a hand with the letter N upon it?' You will then know that he is from me. And, if it should happen that he cannot ask you that question, he will show you the palm of his left hand, in which he will have printed the letter, with ink, or with a pencil. Then it will be up to you to make an excuse to see him privately."

"I understand."

"Now, you are not the easiest man in the world to see, commissioner."

"Why, Nick, I am always——"

"Pardon me, but you are not. There are times when you are busy, and will not be disturbed; so, if at any time a man should send in word to you that he wishes to see you about a dog he wishes to sell, you will see him at once."

"Good! That is a good idea."

"Now, I think that covers all the ground."

"I think so."

"If anything more occurs to me, I will include it in the information to be sent to you by one of my assistants."

"All right."

The detective rose to take his leave; but at the door he paused, hesitated a moment, and then returned to his chair."

"How many Italian detectives do you employ?" he asked.

"We have one detective sergeant——"

"Oh, yes, I know him, and a rattling good fellow he is, too. I did not refer to him. I mean outsiders—men who are not directly connected with the department."

"I think there are three others."

"Well, spur them all up to extra effort, will you?"

"Assuredly."

"And don't for the life of you give a soul any idea of what I am doing."

"I won't. It shall not get beyond my own knowledge."

"I shall leave the city to-night, or to-morrow—and I will actually leave it, too."

"You mean that you will take the train, and go away?"

"I mean just that. Chick and I will go together."

"For some faked destination?"

"No; we will go to the destination we select."

"I see; and double back here, eh?"

"I will find my way back to the other end of that wire—yes."

"It may take several days to get that wire ready."

"It will take more than that for me to get ready. I want the wire up and ready for business, so that I can make use of it, if I care to do so, one week from today."

"I would like it, Nick, if you would let me know when you are at the other end of the wire. Will you do that?"

"I intend to do that. I will have to know that the wire is working; and I will know when I hear the girl reply, 'On deck!'"

"Sure."

"I will tell her then to give 'Pete' my compliments. That will open the ball."

"Good! Then I will know that you are at work."

"You will."

"You think of nothing more, do you?"

"Nothing, only to repeat, with added emphasis, every caution I have given you."

"I won't forget them."

"You know, Mr. Commissioner, that this undertaking is much larger than it appears to be on the surface—and it will take time."

"Of course it will."

"As I said in the beginning, it may take a year. I cannot say now, because I have no idea about it at all."

"There are, doubtless, thousands of members in the organization."

"I don't believe that it is an organization, in the sense in which you refer to it now; but I do believe that there are many—a great many—organizations which work together as one."

"It may be possible that there is a real organization behind all of them, to which they are all more or less subservient."

"That is quite possible; I have thought of that."

"Well, if that is so, then it will be your game to get into the big one—the principal one—won't it?"

"Certainly."

"I don't envy you your job, Nick."

"Don't you? I like it. I think I will have more adventure to the square inch in this case than I have met with in a good while."

"I only hope that you will not run into needless dangers."

"I never do that. With all my apparent recklessness, I am always cautious."

"Don't let them kill you, Nick."

The detective laughed.

"I will not be in half the danger while I am working on the case as will surround me after I have broken up the Black Hand."

"Nevertheless, you are taking your life in your hands—wearing it on your sleeve, for anybody to pluck at."

"Oh, well, I shall not worry about it. A great many outfits have tried to kill me in the past, and I'm very much alive yet; eh?"

"Well, Nick, you have my best wishes."

"I know that. Good afternoon, Mr. Commissioner."

CHAPTER III.

THE ARRIVAL OF MARCO SPADA.

We will merely glance over the events of the following week, during which Nick Carter and his assistants made all preparations for the coming campaign—for that it was to be a veritable campaign nobody doubted.

Every plan that the detective had outlined to the commissioner was carried into effect.

Full and explicit instructions concerning the installation of the telephone, as he had described it, were sent to the commissioner by Ten-Ichi, two days after the interview, for it had consumed that length of time for Nick to determine exactly where he wished to locate himself after his return to New York—but, of that, more later on.

It is sufficient to say that the rooms he intended to occupy were already engaged by that time—and they were engaged for the detective by an Italian friend of his, who agreed to take them and hold them while the telephone was being installed, and until Nick should return to claim them, when he was to appear to sublet them to the newcomer.

On the morning of that same day—the day when Ten-Ichi carried the message to the commissioner—Nick Carter, accompanied by Chick, took a carriage from their home to the Grand Central Station, and there they purchased tickets for Chicago, boarded the train, and were carried out of New York City.

There was no unnecessary ostentation about their departure, and yet the detective managed to have it rather generally understood that he and his chief assistant were going off on an important matter, which would, doubtless, keep them absent from the city for several months.

The reader must understand that a certain class of criminals always tried to keep as well informed as possible about Nick Carter.

Of course, it was always impossible for them to know any details of his movements, but it was sufficient for many of them to know that he was not in New York; and, when one became aware that he was away from home, it was never long before the information leaked through certain well-defined channels until it penetrated to the utmost limits of crookdom.

Then, invariably, the guns and grafters, who had been keeping under cover for fear of encountering him, would suddenly appear in the streets, or, at least, in their old haunts, feeling secure for the time being, or, at least, until word should be rceeived that the great detective had returned.

All this Nick Carter understood very well.

He knew that, if it were known to one of the big "guns" that he had left town, all the smaller ones would know it soon, and that, one by one, throughout crookdom the news would spread.

And that was what he desired.

Thus, when the train rolled out of the station on its way to Chicago, with the detective and his chief assistant, Nick felt that he was really embarked upon the case in hand.

It will not be necessary for us to follow him through all that occurred between the time he left the Grand Central until he returned to it again.

Sufficient to state that, in due course of time, they arrived in the city by the lake—and that there they entirely disappeared from view.

If anybody undertook to keep tabs on them at all, the only thing that could have been reported concerning them would have been about as follows:

"They went to Chicago, all right, and they left the train there, all right, too. After that, the two of them went to the Palmer House, and registered under the names of Jones and Brown. Then, that same afternoon, they called upon the chief of police of Chicago, and were a long time in consultation with him. After that, they returned to their hotel, and apparently retired."

Then, if their door happened to be watched all night, the report might have continued:

"The two detectives were never seen after they went inside their rooms at the hotel that night. Although the doors were watched with great care, they were not seen to emerge from them at all, nor was anybody else seen to come out of them, either."

And there the report would have ended.

There Nick Carter and Chick disappeared utterly.

There all trace of them was lost—if any track of them had been kept.

Nick Carter did not know, and he did not care, whether any person had undertaken to watch his movements or not, for he had taken his precautions so thoroughly and carefully that he was entirely positive that no person alive, save Chick, could connect him with the character he had now assumed.

From Chicago to New York, the two traveled separately.

Nick Carter went by train to Norfolk, Virginia, and thence via the Old Dominion Line to New York; and Chick left the metropolis of the West for Montreal, from whence he was to make his way to New York by any route he pleased.

Both, it seems almost unnecessary to say, represented Italians, and both were so thoroughly disguised that, even if they had been stripped naked, and all sorts of tests applied to them, they could have defied detection.

The stain they employed to darken their skins covered every part of their bodies, and it could only be removed by the application of a formula known to the detective; soap and water would not touch it.

Another thing.

From the moment when the detective parted from the commissioner, after their interview which has been recorded here, he permitted his mustache and an imperial to grow—and Chick did the same.

From the moment the hairs appeared on the face of the two detectives, they kept them dyed jet black, touching them up each morning.

Of course, we do not pretend that either of them could raise a mustache and a goatee in a week of time; but they would have gotten a good start by that time, and they would continue to grow every day, so that, ere long, each would have an adornment of the kind of his own, and thus obviate the necessity of wearing false ones.

Nick also permitted his hair to grow long, and intended it to be much longer as time went on, and this also he kept dyed black by the frequent application of coloring matter.

In costume, Nick Carter played the part of an elegant, while Chick assumed the appearance of a man who had been a laborer, but who had met with good fortune enough to permit him to dress rather above his station.

For the rest, they were not to know each other at all when they met, although their place of meeting was selected, as well as the time for it, before they parted in Chicago.

A short conversation, which occurred between them just before they parted, may be worth noting.

Nick's train was to leave an hour later than Chick's, so the detective accompanied his assistant to the station.

"Now, Chick," he said, just before the time came for them to part, "you thoroughly understand your end of the game, don't you?"

"I've got it all so that I could say it backward," was the reply.

"The time, the hour, the place where we are to meet, and the circumstances, eh?"

"Everything."

"Your name is to be Antonio Volpe; and mine is Marco Spada."

"Sure."

And so they parted.

And so, just nine days after the conversation between the detective and the commissioner, Nick Carter stepped from an Old Dominion steamer to the pier in the city of New York, and stood for a moment, looking around him, after the manner of one who is a stranger in a strange land.

Presently, he picked up his grip, and walked toward West Street; but he stopped at the entrance of the pier long enough to inquire his way to the Italian quarter of the city—and he did it in very good English, too.

"I reckon you'd better look for Mulberry Bend, if you want the dago section of the town," replied his informant. "But you don't look like a chap who would care to go there."

"No? Is it not a—what you call a pleasant quarter of the city?" inquired Nick politely.

"It is about the most unpleasant that you could find," was the reply.

"So? Ah! Is there not, then, a hotel where Italians stop?"

"Well, I don't know of any. There may be, and there probably are, but—— Wait a minute. I'm head stevedore here, mister, and it just occurred to me that I've got a few dagos working for me. I'll send for one of them."

"Thank you," said Nick; and he waited. That was exactly what he had hoped for.

Presently, the Italian who had been sent for appeared, and the stevedore said to him:

"Michael, here is a countryman of yours, who wants some information. Perhaps you can give it to him," and the boss walked away about his own affairs.

A glance at the man who had been summoned told the detective that he was from Northern Italy, and Nick at once addressed him in the dialect he would best understand. And, the moment the man heard his own tongue so glibly spoken, he smiled broadly, and with evident pleasure.

"I am a stranger in this city," said Nick. "I have never been here before. I do not care to go to one of the great hotels. I prefer to be among my own countrymen. Besides, I have business to attend to which makes it necessary that I should do so. Can you direct me?"

"There is nothing that is good enough for the signore, I fear," ventured his informant.

"All things are good enough for me, where the people of my country are," replied Nick.

"Then I can send the signore to a friend of mine, who keeps a restaurant in Mulberry Street, near Grand. It is just around the corner from Grand Street. My friend's name is Luigi Mercodatti. He has rooms over the restaurant. If the signore would apply there——"

"Thank you. I will do so. Where is Grand Street, and where is the other street you mentioned?"

"The signore speaks English?"

"Yes; very well, too."

"Then, if the signore will take that car, going that way, and ask the conductor to let him off at Grand Street, and if then he will take the car that goes through Grand Street in that direction, and will tell that conductor to let him off the car at Mulberry Street, he will be at the corner where he wishes to go. After that, anybody will direct him to the restaurant of Luigi Mercodatti."

"Now, will you please tell me your name?" asked Nick.

"I am Michael Pelluria."

"And I," said the detective, "am Marco Spada. I have no doubt that I shall see you again."

"I shall take dinner to-night at Mercodatti's," was the reply.

"Then I will see you again."

Nick took the car as directed, without once turning his head to look behind him; but, if he had done so, he would have seen that a second Italian had joined Pelluria, and that the two were talking earnestly together, and with their faces turned in his direction, as if he were the subject of their remarks.

"That was rather a swell dago, Mike," said the stevedore, joining them at about the moment when Nick leaped upon the car.

Pelluria nodded his head, shot a meaning glance at the other Italian, and turned away to his work, without making any reply.

The detective followed, literally, the directions given to him. He asked the conductor of the belt line to let him off at the proper place, and again he requested the conductor of the Grand Street car to let him off at Mulberry Street; so that, presently, he found himself—after some further inquiry—standing in front of the restaurant which bore over its door the name of Luigi Mercodatti, in large letters.

After a moment, he stepped inside, and was met by the proprietor, just across the threshold.

"I was directed to come here by one Michael Pelluria," he said, in Italian. "I am a stranger in the city, and, if you have a spare room——"

"Surely, signore, I have every accommodation," was the quick reply.

"Then, for a time at least, I will be your guest. It is now dinner-time, and I am very hungry, so, if you will serve me with your best, and will join me in a bottle of guianti——"

"With much pleasure, signore."

And thus the real campaign began.

CHAPTER IV.

BELLINI, OF THE BLACK HAND.

It would, perhaps, be interesting to the average reader if every move of the detective's preliminary investigations were followed, step by step, and yet such a course seems unnecessary.

Anybody who reads can readily understand how important it was that Nick Carter should ingratiate himself into the confidences of the Italians with whom he became acquainted, one by one, and often with long intervals between the times of making new friends.

He did not make the mistake of being too precipitate.

Instead, he wore daily the manner of a man who preferred to be left to himself; he appeared to be reluctant to make friends with anybody, and he assumed an air of mystery, which, he could see, was highly interesting to the few to whom he had become known.

But he did make himself thoroughly at home in the establishment of Luigi Mercodatti; and he did improve upon the acquaintance already begun with Michael Pelluria—for, in the latter, his quick penetration had recognized a man who was much above his station.

Pelluria, who at the steamship pier had seemed to be merely a common laborer, was, plainly, to Nick Carter's ideas, an educated man; and, that being so, it followed that he must have a strong and potent reason for working at his present employment.

It did not follow, of course, that the fellow was connected with the society against which the detective had pitted himself—but it was a condition which was worth investigation.

Mercodatti, too, had proved to be an interesting character—if for no other reason than that he seemed never to take his eyes off the man who called himself Marco Spada. Nick knew that the man was studying him, although he did not know the reason for that study; but he was content to wait, and do a little studying on his own account.

And so the detective permitted another week to slip past him.

He knew that the commissioner was awaiting anxiously that call over the phone which the detective was supposed to give to announce that he was back in the city, as soon as he succeeded in establishing himself; but he was in no haste to deliver the call.

During that week, while he remained under the roof of Luigi Mercodatti, Nick Carter went and came as any other Italian stranger in the city might have done.

He knew, too, that he was watched; he realized that frequently he was followed; he appreciated the fact that he was a mystery to the new associates he had made, and one which they were trying their utmost to solve.

He made a sufficient show of money to add to the interest of his new friends, but not enough to excite their cupidity, and so the week passed, while he constantly added to his list of acquaintances among the Italian colony.

And then came the moment for which he had waited, hoping that it would come without the necessity of making an effort himself, as it ultimately did.

The time was the early fall—the month of September, in fact—and there were still days when the weather was as hot as midsummer.

There was a little room at the rear of the restaurant, where Nick was in the habit of dining, and where, frequently of late, Pelluria had been in the habit of joining him after his return from the docks, and after he had utterly eliminated the appearances of the occupation he followed; for, of late, he had made no bones of permitting Nick to understand that the life of a stevedore was not his chosen vocation.

It was the eighth day after the detective's arrival in the city—a Saturday evening, in fact—when the incident occurred to which we are about to refer.

Nick had taken his seat at the little table in the back room, and Luigi was serving his dinner to him, when the detective remarked—it must be remembered that he always spoke in Italian with these people:

"Our friend Pelluria is late to-night."

Mercodatti smiled, and shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"He had business to attend to before he came here," he said.

The detective raised his eyebrows, but refrained from asking a question; and, after a moment, Mercodatti added:

"He will be here in a few moments—as soon as he changes his clothes. He came in a moment ago."

"He works very hard," suggested Nick tentatively.

Again Mercodatti shrugged his shoulders. It is remarkable how much—and how little—an Italian can convey by the use of that simple gesture.

"He has resigned to-day," he said.

"What! Given up his position?" asked Nick.

"Yes. He has no further use for it now."

Nick remained silent. Apparently, he was not interested—and, plainly, the Italian was disappointed that his companion was not.

For a moment it seemed as if he was about to speak on, as if he had it in his mind to be somewhat more explicit, but at that instant Pelluria appeared in the doorway.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "our good friend, Signore Marco Spada, is here already?"

"Yes," replied the detective. "I began to think that you would not be here to-night."

"Ah? I had other things to attend to."

Nick made no reply, and they proceeded with their dinner in silence, until Mercodatti had withdrawn to the outer room; and then:

"Have you engagements for to-night, Spada?" asked Pelluria.

"Nothing," replied Nick.

"I have friends who have invited me to be their guest to-night," continued Pelluria; "and, because they have seen us together, they have asked me to bring you with me."

"That is very kind of them," replied the detective.

"You will go with me?"

"With much pleasure, Pelluria. One who is so much alone as I looks upon an invitation to meet pleasant companions as a great boon."

"I told them that you would undoubtedly go with me," Pelluria continued; "and yet, Spada, when you fully understand the real purport of the meeting, you may not be so anxious to attend it."

It was the detective's turn to shrug his shoulders.

Pelluria laughed outright, apparently well pleased.

"You will do, Spada," he said. "Still, it is my duty to give you a fair warning before you consent to go with me to-night."

"So?" said Nick. "As you please, Pelluria."

The ex-stevedore leaned across the table, and whispered:

"We have a society."

Nick shrugged his shoulders, and replied:

"There are many societies."

"A secret society, Spada."

"All societies that are worth the name are secret, Pelluria."

"Our society has a definite object in view."

"It would not be worth the name if it did not."

"My friends have had an eye on you since you have been among us."

Nick shrugged his shoulders again, and made no reply in words.

"They have decided that they want you with them," continued the ex-stevedore.

"It is kind of them," replied Nick.

"I have been delegated to sound you regarding your views."

"Very good; go ahead, Pelluria."

The Italian rose to his feet, closed the door which led to the outer room, and locked it. Then he returned to the table, and resumed his seat.

He leaned forward again now, and very impressively whispered:

"Are you of the Black Hand, Spada?"

Nick pretended to give a violent start. For one fleeting instant his eyes assumed a look of mingled fear and anger. Then he raised both hands in the air, and exclaimed:

"God forbid!"

"Have you, perhaps, heard of Bellini, of the Black Hand?"

For a moment Nick Carter looked straight into the eyes of the man opposite him, but he made no other pretense of having heard the last question. Then, after that moment, he rose from his chair, walked calmly around the table, unlocked the door which Pelluria had fastened, opened it wide ajar, and then as calmly returned to his seat again.

"I have just remembered," he said quietly, "that I have an engagement for this evening. I regret that I will be unable to accompany you, Signore Pelluria."

There seemed to be a repressed expression of unaccountable mirth in the manner of Pelluria because of Nick Carter's reply, and of his manner of making it.

For a little space of time he, also, remained silent; and then, as calmly as Nick had acted, he also left his chair, walked around the table to the door, and closed and locked it again.

"You have not heard me out," he said, when he returned to his seat.

"No?" said Nick interrogatively.

"I did not say that our society was of the Black Hand."

"No?"

"You did not give me time to explain."

"The night is before you, signore."

"Our society is the sworn enemy of the Black Hand, Spada."

Nick raised his eyebrows, but he said nothing.

"We are banded together for the protection of our countrymen, who are made the victims of that villainous association."

The detective looked interested, but he made no comment.

"We adopt the same tactics that are used by the Black Hand in furthering their own schemes," continued Pelluria, as if he were now satisfied of his ground, and had determined to be entirely frank.

Nick Carter nodded.

"We have found that the police of this country are entirely helpless as pitted against the society of the Black Hand. Whenever one of our country is made the victim of its demand for money, we make use of every effort in our power to trace the threats to their source, and, if we find the man who has made them, or any man who is concerned in them, we take the law into our own hands."

The detective nodded again.

"We kill that man—or those men," added Pelluria laconically.

Nick raised his eyes to the ceiling, contracted his shoulders, threw out the palms of his hands, after the manner of a Baxter Street Jew clothier, smiled, and said nothing.

"We fight fire with fire, knives with knives, bullets with bullets, threats with threats, and death with death," continued Pelluria.

"You are brave, signore, to tell me all this," said Nick Carter quietly.

"Why so?"

"Because you do not know, even now, that I am not of the society you fight against. If I were, your life would not be worth"—the detective blew a cloud of smoke into the air from his cigar—"that!"

"I know," said Pelluria, and he smiled. "Do you still feel that you have another engagement for to-night, and that you cannot accompany me?"

"No," replied Nick quietly. "I will go with you."

"And join our society?"

"Surely—since I consent to go there with you."

"And you know nothing of Bellini, of the Black Hand?"

"Bellini," murmured Nick meditatively. "Who is Bellini?"

"Bellini," replied Pelluria slowly, "is the enemy of mankind, and, therefore, he is our enemy, also."

And at that instant there was a rap against the door, and, when Pelluria sprang to open it, Mercodatti appeared on the threshold, stopped there, looked at Pelluria, and said:

"Well?"

CHAPTER V.

NICK CARTER'S CLEVER TRICK.

Mercodatti came into the room, and closed the door behind him. Then he fixed his eyes upon Pelluria, and repeated:

"Well?"

"Our good friend Spada seems to be of the same mind as ourselves," replied Pelluria.

"Good!" exclaimed the proprietor of the restaurant. "It is well. He will go with us this night?"

"Yes."

"And does he know who is Bellini?"

"He has said that he does not; and he has asked, 'Who is Bellini?'"

"Good again! Spada, you will go with us? Eh?"

"I did not know that you were of the party, Mercodatti," replied Nick; "but, assuredly, I will accompany you. The more gladly since you are both to stand my sponsors."

"Then it is settled?"

"Yes."

Mercodatti glanced at the time.

"It is eight o'clock," he said. "At midnight we will meet."

"Where?" asked Nick. "Are we to start from here?"

Both the Italians favored him with an indulgent smile. It was Mercodatti who replied.

"Hardly that," he said.

"I am to meet you outside?" asked Nick.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"You know the Atlantic Garden, on the Bowery? You have been there since you came to the city?"

"Yes," said Nick. "I was alone when I went there. Was I followed?"

"You have been watched ever since you came, Spada."

"Because you wanted me for a member of your society?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why I was thought desirable?"

"Because—— You will be told that later. You are smart. You are well educated. You are not one to be afraid. You are silent. You do not talk. More than that, you do not ask questions. That is sufficient reason, for the present?"

"Yes. But what of the Atlantic Garden?"

"This is Saturday night."

"Yes."

"The garden will close its doors at midnight."

"So I have been told."

"You will be there, at the garden, at half-past eleven."

"Yes."

"You will take a seat at a table where you will be alone."

"Yes."

"A man and a woman will approach you, and ask if the other seats are engaged. When you assure them that the seats are not engaged, they will occupy two of them."

"Yes."

"After a little, the man will leave the table—will leave you alone with the woman."

"Yes."

"Presently, she will ask you if you have been long in this country, and you will reply that there is only one country, and that you carry it with you wherever you go. She will say:

"'Is it Italy?'

"And you will reply: 'Italy.'"

"I understand," said the detective.

"You will endeavor to appear, then, as if you were old acquaintances, and, at ten minutes to twelve, you will ask:

"'Shall we be going?'

"She will reply: 'Where would you go?'

"You will answer: 'To keep my appointment;' and she will respond: 'To keep your appointment.'

"After that, you have only to go with her wherever she takes you. Do you understand it all, now?"

"Perfectly."

"And you will remember the words and replies?"

"Without fail."

"'Then, we need have no further discussion here. Whatever else there is to say will be said later."

"Very well."

Ten minutes later, the detective was in the street.

He was perfectly well aware, when he left the restaurant, that he was followed, and he understood that it was not the intention of his new friends to lose sight of him until he was at the garden, waiting to keep the strange appointment that had been made for him.

Hitherto, he had made no effort to throw would-be "shadows" off his track; but just now, for reasons of his own, he wished to be unobserved—for an hour, at least. And, beside his own desires on that point, he realized that it would not be a bad move on his part to give his new friends something to think about.

Therefore, he resolved to "shake his shadow."

The detective had not been deceived—or he believed he had not been—by the attitude of the two men in the restaurant.

Their talk about a society of Italians which was inimical to the Black Hand, he regarded as all rot.

The form of the questions that had been asked of him—especially those which referred to one Bellini—had not been asked without a definite reason, he was certain; and that his replies, given at random, had been somehow unusually satisfactory to the two men, he knew.

Perhaps it was that, inadvertently, he had given correct, stereotyped, answers; possibly, the gestures he had employed had been significant. Anyhow, he felt certain that, in some way that was still unknown to himself, he had succeeded in satisfying the two men that he would be an advantageous coadjutor with them; and he was, therefore, satisfied that he was, all at once, on the right track.

The detective was thoroughly satisfied in his own mind that both Mercodatti and Pelluria were members of one of the groups of the Black Hand, and that their talk tonight had been entirely in the nature of a test.

He certainly hoped that it was so, for, in that case, he would have accomplished his purpose of being led into membership with the band much sooner than he had dared to hope.

These are a sample of the thoughts which were coursing rapidly through his brain when he left the restaurant, and when he decided that, for once—the only time since he returned to New York—he would elude the man who had been delegated to watch him.

There was a certain place in the city where he and Chick had agreed to meet—a saloon in Houston Street, where Chick was to appear each night at ten o'clock until Nick came—where, each night, he was to go, and wait till eleven; and now the time had come when Nick wished to keep that appointment.

But he had no wish that the man who was following him should witness that meeting, although no harm would follow even if he did so.

Still, Nick resolved to throw him off the track, and this is how he did it:

When he left the restaurant, he walked rapidly through Grand Street toward the Bowery.

Arrived there, he turned the corner sharply; then he stopped, and waited.

A few seconds later, the shadow dashed around the corner on a run, when Nick quietly turned back through Grand Street.

He walked rapidly back to the restaurant again, and went to his own room, from which he presently returned, to discover that the shadow was again outside the door.

This time the detective hurried toward Broadway, and boarded a car, and, a few moments later, he saw the shadow standing on the rear platform.

At Fourteenth Street, Nick left the car, and hastened to the subway, where he descended, and stood waiting at the express-train side of the uptown station.

The shadow pursued him, and presently came and stood quite close to the detective, where he waited, for Nick had selected a spot on the station where he knew the doors of the incoming train would be opened to disgorge and to receive its passengers.

The detective stood quite close to the edge of the platform.

Once he looked around, as if to take a general survey of the throng, and saw that the shadow was immediately behind him.

When the train rolled in at the station, Nick Carter was the first one to board it at that point, and the shadow was immediately behind him; but the detective stepped across the platform to the opposite side, and stopped there, allowing the other passengers to pass inside the car—and the shadow, perforce, passed inside with them.

Then the detective stood where he was until the last passenger was on the train at that entrance, and the guard was in the act of closing the doors; then he stepped toward him very quickly, and exclaimed:

"Is this a local?"

"No. Broadway express," was the surly reply.

"Let me out, please."

And Nick sprang to the platform through the already half-closed door, which slammed shut behind him; and, as it did so, Nick saw the shadow start for the door of the train, as if he, also, would have left the car if he could.

But he was too late to do that.

The train had already started.

It would not stop again until it reached Forty-second Street, and the occupation of the shadow would be gone.

The detective watched the train out of the station, with a grim smile on his face; then he turned slowly away, and mounted the stairs to the street, pausing, however, at the surface entrance, and waiting there for a long time, in order to satisfy himself that there were not two shadows after him, instead of one.

Satisfied of that, presently he hurried to Broadway again, and took a down-town car, and in due course of time arrived at Houston Street, where he made his way at once to the saloon at which he was to meet Chick.

It was not yet ten o'clock when he arrived, and a hasty survey of the room told him that the assistant was not there, so he selected a table, and seated himself beside it, to wait.

A waiter came to him, and he ordered something, endeavoring, in the meantime, to catch the eye of the proprietor—wihch he finally succeeded in doing. Then he made a significant gesture, and a few moments later the proprietor left the men he was talking with, and came toward Nick, with outstretched hand.

"Hello, old chap! How are you?" he exclaimed.

And Nick rose in his place, and accepted the proffered hand with effusion.

"Hello, McCorkle! How are you, Barney?" he replied.

"Fine as a fiddle, Mr. Spada. Out o' sight. When did you get to New York?"

"Only a short time ago, Barney."

"Faith, it does me two eyes good to see you, so it does! I'm not forgetting the time you did me the great favor, Mr. Spada; the time when me pocket was picked in that heathenish country of yours—begging your pardon, I'm sure—and you stood for me as if you'd known me always. And now, what will you be after havin' to drink? And is there anything in life that Barney McCorkle can do for you?"

"There is that room I wrote to you about, Barney?"

"Sure, it's ready for you, so it is. It's around the corner a bit—just among a nest of your own countrymen, Mr. Spada, as you requested. But I've had it made comfortable for you, according to directions. Will you be after going around to see it, Mr. Spada?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MESSAGE OVER THE PHONE.

It will have been observed, from the dialogue between the detective and the proprietor of the saloon, that Nick Carter "knew where he was at" when he entered the place, and that the meeting, and the conversation that followed upon it, was part and parcel with the plans and preparations made by the detective before he left the city, to return as Marco Spada.

In fact, Barney McCorkle was an old-time friend of Nick Carter's.

The detective had once befriended him in a way that no man could forget; in a word, he had, by his skill, saved Barney from going to prison for a crime he did not commit; and Barney was not one to forget an act of that kind.

Thus it was, through Barney and an Italian friend of the saloon-keeper, that the room which the detective desired for his telephone connection had been engaged; and thus it was that Barney, for more than a week, had been on the lookout for the signal which Nick had succeeded in transmitting to him soon after he entered the place.

He had told Barney, before his departure:

"You will not know me when you see me. I will be an Italian. My name will be Spada. But, when you see me break a cigar in half, and throw it down with evident anger, before your eyes, you will know that the Italian is Nick Carter."

The conversation that had ensued after the giving of the signal had been in an ordinary tone of voice, so that it could be plainly heard by the other customers in the place; and, when the waiter came to take Barney's order, in response to his invitation to Nick to have something, the saloon-keeper said to him:

"William, blow off the house. The treat is on me. Sure I've found an old friend here, that I think a lot of. Once, when I was in a strange country, and broke, at that, he stood for me, although he didn't know me from Mrs. Murphy's pig. Eh, Mr. Spada?"

It happened that just at that moment there was another arrival in the saloon.

The front door opened, and a second Italian entered; but he walked straight to the bar, and, in broken English, called for a glass of beer.

"Here, Tony, come here!" called Barney across the room.

The newcomer turned, and stared in the direction of the table for a moment. Then he smiled, and crossed the room, with the glass in his hand.

"Sure," said Barney, "you're both Eyetalyuns, and ye ought to know each other, so ye had. Mr. Spada, this is me good friend, Tony Volpe. He's your own countryman, and glad I am to make ye known to each other. Faith, you're the two best dagos I ever knew, so ye are."

"Is dissa da man you gotta da rooma for?" asked Chick of Barney. The reader has already guessed that the newcomer was Chick.

"That same," said Barney. Then, to Nick, he added: "Tony is in the same house with you. He will be your neighbor; and, maybe, if you want to go around there now, he will take you with him. You won't need me now that Tony is here."

Then, to the evident delight of Barney the two supposed Italians began to talk rapidly in their own language.

After a little, they rose from the table together, and prepared to leave the saloon.

"Will ye be afther coming back, later?" asked Barney.

"Not to-night," replied the detective. "But I will drop in and see you every day."

"Sure, Mr. Spada! Do that same. Good night to you. Good night, Tony."

And then, as the two detectives left the place together, they could hear Barney discoursing to the other customers on their merits, and telling what a good friend Spada had once been to him.

"Have you had a shadow on your track since you returned to the city?" asked the detective of his assistant as they walked along together.

"Nary a shadow. Not once," was the reply.

"That is all right, then. I have been shadowed every moment; but I invited it, for it was precisely what I most desired."

"I know. Where is he now?"

"I thought I would shake him for this evening. I was not sure of just how well Barney would play his part."

"He did it to the queen's taste, didn't he?"

"You're right he did."

"It wouldn't have made much difference if your shadow had been there."

"It wouldn't have made any difference. I am almost sorry that he was not there. And now, we won't do any more talking until we get to my room."

A walk of fifteen minutes took them there, after which they mounted two flights of stairs to the third floor of the building, which happened also to be the top floor.

The room which they entered had been made very comfortable; it had, in fact, been made to represent the abiding-place of a well-to-do Italian, who, notwithstanding his good fortune, preferred to live among his own people.

It was furnished with some attempt at elegance, in accordance with the plans of the detective.

There was an expensive rug on the floor; a few fairly good pictures on the walls; four big, leather-covered chairs; a couch, of the same pattern; a library-table and a few books in the middle of the floor; a bookcase, with more books, at one side of the room; a piano; a shrine, beautifully curtained, in one corner; and, in an alcove, partly concealed by portières, was a wide brass bed.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the detective. "This is cozy. How about the walls, the ceiling, the floor, and the doors? Eh?"

"You could shout 'Bloody murder!' in here without a chance that your cry would be heard outside the room," replied Chick. "Ten-Ichi did the whole thing up brown."

"Good! Now, where is the telephone?"

"That is the best part of the whole thing," said Chick. "You would never guess where it is."

"Show me where it is, then."

"Follow me," said Chick.

He led the way into the alcove, rolled back one side of the rug that covered the floor there, and disclosed a small trap-door in the floor.

This he raised, and from the recess thus revealed he lifted a transmitter and receiver, to which was attached a long coil of insulated wire.

"There you are," he said, and then passed the instrument to the detective.

Without waiting to make any reply, Nick took the receiver from the hook and placed it against his ear.

He had only a moment to listen, and then plainly he heard the words:

"On deck!"

"Good!" said Nick in reply. "You may tell Pete, when you see him in the morning, that I am here, and that things have begun to move, slowly but perfectly."

"Very good, sir."

"Has he expressed any anxiety at the delay?"

"A little."

"Tell him that everything is all right."

"Yes, sir."

"Good night."

"Good night, sir."

The detective gave the instrument back into Chick's hands, and the assistant returned it to its hiding-place, and, having dropped the trap-door, pulled the rug back into its former position.

"We can consider ourselves well started now," said the detective when they had returned to the larger room, and had lighted their cigars. Then he looked at his watch.

"I have only half-an-hour to wait here," he said. "Then I must be going."

"Got a date?" asked Chick.

"Yes; and with a woman, too," replied Nick, laughing; and then, in detail, he told his assistant about everything that had happened to him since he stepped from the deck of the Old Dominion steamer up to the present moment.

"Now, Chick," he asked in conclusion, "what have you done?"

"I am afraid not very much."

"You have got the room directly in the rear of this one, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And have been living here, quietly, ever since you arrived?"

"Yes."

"Have you made any acquaintances?"

"Oh, a few. Nothing worth mentioning."

"I don't suppose you have come across a shadow of the Black Hand, have you?"

"Nary a shadow."

"I have decided, Chick, to make a little change in my original plans."

"How so?"

"I think it will be better to make you a victim of the Black Hand than to attempt to get you into it, although that part of it may come later."

"What do you mean by making me a victim?"

"I shall set you up in the banking business."

"Eh?"

"It is your play to start an Italian bank somewhere in this neighborhood."

"I'm on. Go ahead."

"Of course, we will continue to be friends; but, after you are started in the business, I will find an occasion to tell my Black Hand friends that you are an immensely rich man; that you are the owner of a bank in Rome, and another in Naples—possibly I may give you one in Salerno, also."

"That will be nice."

"Yes; I will tell them that you are immensely rich; also, that you are a very good friend of mine; also, that you had some trouble in Italy, which compelled you to leave the country, which will be the reason for your appearance here; also, that your effort to appear poor is all put on; also, that Antonio Volpe is not your true name, but that it is so-and-so—I will think of a good one to give them."

"And then it will occur to them that, inasmuch as I am living here under cover—in disguise, in fact, having committed some crime at home—and am also very rich, that I will be an easy mark. Is that the idea?"

"Precisely."

"Then I suppose, when the plan is suggested to you of bleeding me, you will object. because I am your friend?"

"That's the idea, Chick."

"But, ultimately, just to show them that you are hand-in-hand with them, and that you will stick to the society, no matter what happens, you will give in, and permit me to be robbed."

"No; I shall permit you to be killed."

"Eh? That's interesting. How will you do that?"

"It won't be done until the time is ripe, and when I can make use of you elsewhere."

"So I will have, at least, a short lease of life, eh?"

"Yes."

"I don't know but it may be a good idea. You will win their confidence utterly if you engineer the thing; and that is your plan, isn't it?"

"Sure. I may even do the killing."

"Better. I think I would have more confidence in it in that case."

"The point is that I have got to kill somebody, in order to get myself thoroughly into the confidence of the society. That is why I altered the plan. I can do the act with you, and they will never know that you come to life right after it. Then they will believe that they hold the crime of murder over my head—and the rest will be comparatively easy."

"It is a good idea, Nick."

"I think so; and now I must be going."

"Is there any objection to my blowing in there soon after you arrive?"

"Yes, there is. Stay here, where you are, for the rest of the night."

CHAPTER VII.

BELLINI'S BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER.

It was exactly half-past eleven when Nick Carter walked into the Atlantic Garden.

The night being Saturday, he could not find an unoccupied table, try as he might, and he was obliged, at last, to seat himself at one where there was another person opposite him.

However, he made the best of it. He knew that the friends (?) he was expecting would comprehend that it had been impossible for him to comply literally with their directions—and, for the rest, he waited.

Much to his surprise, however, and quite agreeably, too, when the hands of the great clock pointed to eleven-forty-five, the party who was at the table with him rose and went away, so he did find himself alone, as he had desired; and then, before the departing ones had had time to reach the street, a man and a woman dropped into the vacated seats.

It was no part of the detective's instructions for him to say a word, or to appear to notice his expected companions until they had fulfilled their part of the formula that had been given him; but he had no doubt that these two were the ones he was expecting, for he could determine with half an eye that they were Italians.

After a little, the man went away; and he did it so quietly and unostentatiously that he was gone almost before Nick knew it.

But the woman was left—and she was a beautiful woman, too. When an Italian woman is a beauty, there are no half-way measures about it. As a rule, she is either very beautiful or exceedingly ugly.

While he was turning these thoughts over in his mind, the woman permitted her great limpid black eyes to rest full upon his face, and then she asked:

"Have you been long in this country, Signore Spada?"

"There is only one country, and I carry that with me wherever I go," replied Nick, following the directions given him to the letter.

"Is it Italy?"

"Italy."

There was a moment of silence after that, and then Nick asked:

"Will you have some wine, madam?"

"No; it is getting very late."

"Shall we be going?"

"Where would you go?"

"To keep my appointment."

"Ah, yes. To keep your appointment."

Every necessary question and answer had now been asked and received, but the woman did not offer to make a move.

Instead, she sat quite still in her chair, with her great eyes fixed upon Nick's, with an expression he could not fathom.

It was at once pathetic and appealing, and the detective thought he detected a wish on her part to say something which she dared not utter.

Presently, she appeared to find the necessary courage, for she leaned forward upon the table, and, in a tone so low that it could not have reached other ears had any been listening, she asked, quite suddenly:

"Do you know where you are going? Do you know where I am to take you?"

Their conversation was, of course, in Italian.

"I know only what was told to me before I came here to meet you," replied the detective evasively.

"Signore, have you any idea of the dangers you will incur this night?"

"I am afraid that I have not, signorina," he replied.

"I see that you doubt me," she murmured.

"It is well for us to doubt everybody until we know perfectly well whom we can trust, is it not?" he asked.

She glanced toward the clock.

"We still have a moment or two before we must go," she said. "I would like to be your friend, signore."

"And why may we not be friends?" he replied.

"Ah, I do not blame you, but you think that I am trying you, even as you were tried this afternoon, at Mercodatti's."

"Well? And what then?" asked Nick.

"I like your face, signore. You are not——"

She stopped abruptly in her speech, and for the flash of an instant a hunted look of real fright appeared in her beautiful eyes.

"Come," she said, and rose.

Nick did the same, and together they passed out upon the street, in silence.

"Where now?" asked Nick, pausing.

"There is a carriage waiting for us. This way," she replied.

Then she led him up the street a few rods, and presently stopped before a closed hack.

"This is it," she said; and Nick opened the door for her to enter.

When he had seated himself beside her, and the horses had started, he asked the question which had been on the tip of his tongue since they left the table.

"What were you about to say when you stopped so suddenly before we left the garden?" he asked. "And why did you pause so abruptly?"

"We were watched," she replied.

"By whom?"

"Pelluria."

"I saw nothing of him."

"Nevertheless, he was there—at the door."

"You fear him?"

"Everybody fears him, signore—as you will presently have reason to do."

"I fear nobody, signorina."

"Is that a mere idle boast, made for my benefit? Or is it true?" she asked.

"I think it is true."

"If I speak plainly to you, will you betray my confidence?"

"If you fear that I will do that, do not speak."

"Will you be equally frank with me?"

They were passing an arc light at the moment, and the glare of it shone through the open window of the hack full upon the woman's face.

The detective turned partly in his seat, and regarded her closely, during that brief interval, and to his astonishment he saw that there were tears in her eyes.

With that impulsive judgment which never failed him, he replied to her question.

"Yes," he said. "I believe that I can trust you. I don't know why, but I do. Shall we be friends?"

"Oh, sir, if you only would be my friend! I need one so badly."

"I will be your friend."

"Swear it."

"I do swear it, on my honor!"

"It is an oath to me, before you have taken that other oath."

"Yes; it is an oath to you which I will keep against all others."

"I believe you."

"You may. I speak earnestly."

She was silent a moment, and then she asked:

"Do you know where I am taking you?"

"No. I have no idea."

"But you do know why I am in charge of you, do you not?"

"I know what Mercodatti and Pelluria have told me."

"Will you tell me what they told you?"

"That I am to be made a member of a society which is organized to fight against the Black Hand."

"Did you believe that?"

"Frankly, I did not."

"Tell me what you did believe."

"That I am to be taken to the Black Hand itself."

"In that, signore, you are correct."

"I thought so."

"Will you tell me why, since you believe that—will you tell me why you consented to do this thing? To join the Black Hand?"

"I would tell you, if I really had a good reason."

"But there must be a reason."

"Let us say, then, that in my talk with the two men things went so far that I could not decline without incurring the risk of sudden and violent death."

"And yet you told me a moment ago that you fear nothing, and nobody," she murmured.

"I fear death. We all do."

She shuddered.

"Yes," she said, "we all do that. I fear it hourly, notwithstanding the fact that I am——"

She stopped, and Nick waited; but she did not continue.

"And yet you are—who?" asked Nick.

"I am Lucia Bellini, signore."

She made the statement impressively—very much as if she fully expected that he would be shocked and horrified by the statement, or, at least, startled.

But the name meant nothing to Nick Carter, save that he had heard it several times while he talked with the two Italians in the back room at Mercodatti's.

He looked politely interested, but nothing more; and they were then passing another arc light, so that it was her turn to get a full view of his face, and to read it, apparently, correctly.

"Does the name Bellini mean nothing to you, signore?" she asked, with very evident relief in her voice.

"Nothing."

"You have never heard it before?"

"Oh, yes; several times to-day."

"But never before to-day?"

"No; never until to-day."

"And yet they said that you were already of the Black Hand."

"Who said that?"

"Pelluria and Mercodatti."

"Why did they say that?"

"Because, during your talk with them, you gave them two answers, and you made them two gestures, which convinced them that you were already of the society."

"That is interesting; but, I assure you, that they were entirely mistaken."

"Swear that to me, signore."

"I swear it, again on my honor!"

"I believe you. But I must also warn you, before I forget it."

"Of what?"

"That you do not admit to them what you have just told me."

"That I am not already of the Black Hand, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It will be better for you not to do so."

"Then I will not do so. But I dare not say that I am of the society. They would find me out."

"You need say nothing. Wait. I will tell you what to say, and what to do. We have a long ride ahead of us, and there will be plenty of time. I will be your savior, Signore Spada."

"Thank you," said Nick simply, for he believed her.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE QUEEN OF THE BLACK HAND.

Lucia Bellini was silent for several moments after that, until Nick began to think that she was repenting of her confidences, and was suddenly resolved to say no more.

But he was presently assured that such was not the case, for, after a little, she half turned toward him, and began again, in a lower tone.

"You can make them positive that you are already of the Black Hand, and you can yet deny that you are—in words," she murmured, almost in his ear, leaning toward him, and almost whispering the words.

"Tell me how to do so," he said.

"Where have you come from?" she asked suddenly, apparently with an abrupt change of the subject, but still in that same low tone of voice; and he was amazed.

But, before he had an opportunity to express his surprise, she replied for him.

"You must reply, when that question is asked of you, in these words: 'Out of the shadow of the past.'"

"I see," said the detective. "You are instructing me."

"Yes; did you not understand?"

"No; not at once."

"Will you remember that reply?"

"Certainly."

"Then, you will be asked: 'Whither are you going?'"

"And the reply?"

"'Into the shadow of what is to come.'"

"'Do you always dwell in the shadow?' will be asked you then; and you will reply:

"'When I work, I work in the shadow; when I play, I play in the sunlight.' Can you remember all that?"

"Easily."

"That is all you need to know—oh, no; there is one thing more."

"Well?"

"It is about my own name."

"Yes."

"My last name, I mean."

"The name Bellini," said Nick.

"Yes."

"And what of it?"

"Two centuries ago, an ancestor of mine founded the Black Hand. It was originally a revolutionary society, organized for political purposes only."

"I can well believe that."

"And from that day to this a Bellini has always been its chief."

"That explains the significance of the name, then."

"Yes; but the name is never used, save as you have heard it to-day."

"I see. It is a sort of sacred charm to the members, eh?"

"Yes. Even we live under an assumed name. We are not known by our right name."

"And yet you just now told me your right name."

"I did it to test you. I saw at once that it meant nothing to you. The light fell full upon your face at that instant, and I read your thoughts. I knew that I was not mistaken."

"I am glad that you could read me so correctly."

"My father is the present head of the society."

"I had already guessed as much."

"Signore Spada, there are a thousand small societies, which hover around an imaginary center which is known to the elect—if I may use the term—as Bellini's Home."

"Yes."

"It is more than likely that you will be asked by some person to-night if you have ever visited Bellini's Home."

"And, in that case, what am I to reply?"

"You are to make no reply in words at all."

"What then?"

"You will strike the person, no matter who it is—even if it should be I—you will use your fist, and strike that person with force enough to knock him down—if you can."

"Oh, I think I can do that, all right."

"Do not strike in the face. Hit the person on the shoulder; or, better, if you are near enough, and are strong enough, seize him, and throw him from you so that he will fall."

"I think I am strong enough to do all that," said Nick, smiling. "But isn't that rather an odd thing to do?"

"It will be expected of you."

"Then, you can depend upon it, that the chap who asks that question will take a lightning-express trip across the room, and against the wall, that will surprise him," said Nick.

"You must be careful not to hurt the person unnecessarily."

"But I can jar him a bit, eh?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I suppose, after that, he will be for sticking a knife in my back."

"Not if you are not too rough."

"All right. And what comes after that?"

"You will be spared the necessity of taking their terrible oath."

"Good! That is something, at least."

"And then your oath to me will have nothing to interfere with it."

"Let me assure you, Signorina Bellini——"

"Ah! I almost forgot. You must forget that I have told you my true name."

"It is forgotten already, signorina."

"I am, to you, as to all others, Lucia Lacava."

"To me, you will always remain my friend, by whatever name you are called."

"Thank you. Now, tell me what you were about to assure me when I interrupted you."

"I was about to assure you that my oath to you would take precedence of all others, no matter what they might be. I have sworn to be your friend; I will remain your friend through whatever may happen."

"I believe you. And now, we must return to our discussion."

"Yes."

"You have not told me truly what it was that induced you to consent to join with the society."

"I consented because, in that conversation with the two men, I had gone too far to withdraw."

She was silent a moment, and then she said:

"I will have to accept that explanation, although I will be frank with you, and admit that it does not satisfy me. I think that you must have had another reason."

Nick was silent. He thought it best not to reply; but she persisted.

"Was there not another reason, signore?"

"There may be another, later; there is no other at present, signorina."

"You mean that you do not fully trust me?"

"No; I mean that I cannot fully explain."

She sighed deeply, and then murmured:

"I wish it were possible that we could be quite frank with each other."

"Perhaps it will be so a little later," he ventured.

She turned suddenly toward him, and spoke with deep emotion.

"Signore," she said, "I will lay my own affairs bare before you. I am of the Black Hand, but I am a traitor to it. I would that it could be destroyed, root and branch. I would give my life to that end. Don't interrupt me. Listen to me. Since I was a little child, I have been a daily witness to the horrors of the society. It has for its only object murder—deliberate murder; nothing else. It preys upon mankind; it extorts money from those who can ill spare it; it threatens; it kills; it pursues relentlessly. When a victim is selected, a man is chosen by lot to kill him, if he resists. If that man refuses to act, he is himself murdered by the others."

"And your father—what part does he play in this business?" asked Nick.

"My father, thank God, is an invalid. It is a terrible thing to thank Heaven for, is it not, signore?"

"I think I understand you."

"His name, his antecedents, everything compels him to remain the nominal head of the parent organization—of Bellini's Home, you understand."

"Yes."

"If he refused—if he did not appear to be one with them all—if he did not consent to be their king—their so-called ruler—he would be murdered without compunction."

"And then?"

"Then I would be the only Bellini left to them."

"You mean that they would force you to become the head of the organization?"

"Yes."

"Its queen, so to speak."

"Exactly that."

"Tell me about your father."

"My father is a good man. A better one never lived. He would not hurt a fly, and yet, all through the last ten years of his life, he has been obliged to condone murder; has been obliged to appear to be one with them in all respects. He has had to do this, not only to save his own life, but to spare me. It is really for my sake that he has done it—not for his own."

"I can understand that."

"All that is why I thanked God that he is an invalid. He does not have to take a really active part in the affairs of the society."

"I see."

"Nor do I—being a woman. But, if he were to die, it would be different."

"Different in what manner?"

"I would be looked upon as the chief."

"Yes."

"And, being able-bodied and well, I would be compelled to take an active part."

"Notwithstanding the fact that you are a woman?"

"Yes; in spite of that."

"It is terrible."

"I am a Bellini. They look upon the Bellinis as the heathen looks upon his idol."

"Almost with superstition, eh?"

"Entirely with superstition."

"Tell me, do any of them suspect your father of being lukewarm?"

"I think not—unless it is Mercodatti. I have sometimes thought that he is suspicious."

"It will be well, then, to keep an eye on him."

"Yes; to watch him closely."

"Do any of them suspect you?"

"I think not. I have thought that Mercadotti, and, perhaps, Pelluria, do—but I am never sure. There is another thing, too."

"What is that?"

"Both of those men—or, I should say, each of them—wishes to marry me."

"Ah!"

"Do you understand now, signore, why I stand so in need of a friend?"

"I do."

"I cannot tell you why I determined to trust you, but I did so determine, almost from the first moment I saw you. It was inner consciousness that told me to do so, and I determined to trust it fully."

"I am glad you did so, signorina. You have made no mistake. I cannot tell you now exactly why, for there is not time; but, after a little, you shall know."

CHAPTER IX.

THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE MURDERERS.

The carriage in which Nick Carter and Lucia Bellini were passengers traveled rapidly, but so interested were the two in the subject they were discussing that the distance they covered seemed as nothing.

The detective was conscious, from time to time, of the neighborhood they were passing, and now, as he gazed out through the open window, he saw that they were crossing Harlem Bridge, and would soon enter the Borough of the Bronx.

"Will you tell me where we are going?" he asked his companion.

"Yes," she replied. "There is a big house out here, which stands far back from the road. It is one of the old mansions which formerly belonged to one of the largest estates in this part of the country—the De Joinville mansion. Perhaps you know of it."

"Yes; very well," he replied.

"We are going there."

"It is, then, the headquarters of this particular group of the Black Hand?"

"Yes. Outwardly, it is merely a tenement in which a dozen Italian families are living; but really it is the headquarters, as you say."

"Then everybody who lives in that house is an active member of this particular group?"

"Yes."

"Now tell me where you live."

"Half-a-mile beyond. My father owns his own home. It is on the Old Boston Road."

"That reminds me, signorina; shall you tell your father of the conversation we have had together, and of the confidences we have exchanged?"

"For the present—no. I would not dare to do so. A little later—yes."

"And when we arrive at our destination, now, will I see you again?"

"I cannot say. Possibly not again to-night."

"But if it should become important at any time that I do see you——"

She was silent for a moment; and then she said:

"We have a telephone in the house."

Nick shook his head with emphasis.

"It would not be at all safe to make use of that," he said. "If those men are spying upon you, that would be their most direct means of accomplishing it."

"Then I do not know how——"

"Tell me exactly how to find your house," he interrupted.

She did so, giving him the number, and adding to that implicit directions for finding the place, even in the darkest night; and to that she added:

"My room is at the southeast corner of the house. There is a window facing east and another which faces south. From the southern window I will drop a stout cord, and leave it there. If at any time you feel that it is important to communicate with me, you will have but to pull that cord. Twenty minutes after you have done that I will be at the side door."

"Very good," said Nick.

"But you must remember," she continued, "that we are surrounded by spies."

"I will remember."

"We are almost there now."

Five minutes later the carriage came to a stop at a corner, and the driver got down and opened the door.

"You will have to get out here," he said gruffly; and, without a word of protest, Lucia obeyed.

"This way," she said to Nick, as they alighted; and he offered her his arm, while the driver sprang back upon his box and drove rapidly away through the darkness.

"Is that driver one of them?" the detective asked.

"Yes. Hush! Do not ask questions now."

From the point where they left the hack, they walked several city blocks, and finally turned through an opening in a dilapidated fence, and followed a narrow and winding path toward the shadowy outlines of a huge, square building which stood in the center of a large, and otherwise unoccupied, plot of ground.

The time was now a little past one in the morning, and yet there were many lights to be seen through the windows of the old house; and as they approached nearer to it, they could see that there were lights also outside—lights that were occasioned by the flaring of small camp-fires, where many of the laboring Italians had camped out near to the building, there being no room to accommodate them inside.

"There is an unusual number of them present to-night," she whispered to the detective. "I begin to fear that this is not merely an ordinary meeting. You will be on your guard?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"And remember all that I have told you?"

"Assuredly."

"And the answers I have directed you to make to their questions?"

"Certainly."

"Then all will be well; unless——"

"Unless what, signorina?"

"Unless they should take it into their heads to suspect me."

"Do you regard that as a possibility?"

"A possibility—yes; but hardly a likely one. We are here now. Silence."

They were obliged to thread their way among the camp-fires that have been mentioned, and if the low-browed, dark-visaged men who were grouped around them took any interest in the coming of the two, they did not evince it more than by casual glances.

At the door of the house Lucia paused, and, turning to the detective, she said briefly:

"Wait here."

Then she disappeared inside the house.

Nick turned his back to the door, the better to study the rather interesting scene around the fires; and he did not hear a stealthy tread as it approached behind him, nor was he aware of the actual propinquity of another person until he was suddenly apprised of the fact by the dropping of a blanket over his head—a blanket which smelled foully, and which almost smothered him.

At the same instant his feet were deftly kicked from under him, and he fell backward into the arms of two men.

With quick and dexterous motions they folded the blanket around the detective, lifted him from his feet, and bore him bodily away.

Nick Carter would not have fallen such an easy prey to this attack had he not been more than half expecting something of the sort, and have made up his mind to offer no resistance.

It was a part of his game to remain utterly docile in their hands, and to permit them to do with him as they would, without question; so he remained perfectly passive in their hands while they carried him into the house.

But he studied the directions they took, even though the blanket prevented him from seeing anything.

First, they passed through numerous doors. Then they ascended a flight of stairs. Then through other rooms and doorways. Then down some stairs for a distance so considerable that he was satisfied that they had taken two flights as one, and so had borne him to the cellar of the house.

Beside that, even through the folds of the foul-smelling blanket, he could detect the odor of fresh earth, and he presently knew that they were passing underground—for now they traveled a considerable distance in a straight line.

After making two halts, during which doors were opened and closed, he was told gruffly to stand upon his feet, and then, with a quick series of motions, the blanket was removed.

Any other person than Nick Carter would have started back in afright then.

He found himself the very center of a throng of men, and he correctly surmised in that instant that there were upward of a score present.

Every man there had both arms extended toward him. In the right hand of each man was a pocket electric light, not unlike the one he carried in his own pocket, although not as powerful—and every man of them was pressing against the button, so that the shafts from that score or more of lights were directed straight into his eyes; for the lamps were not three feet distant from him.

In the left hand of each man was a glittering dagger; and the points of these were also within three feet of his body, so that he was the center of a perfect ring of steel points.

Then, for a full minute after that, there was absolute silence, while Nick Carter calmly folded his arms and waited.

Suddenly, directly in front of him, the human circle parted, and in the opening appeared Pelluria, also with folded arms; calm, smiling, but with a menace in that smile.

"So," he said. "We meet again, Spada, my friend."

Nick bowed his head, but made no reply in words.

"Where have you come from, to get here?" Pelluria asked suddenly; and Nick instantly recalled the instructions he had received from Lucia. And since the question was not couched in the exact language she had given him, he resolved to deliver his answers a little differently, but to incorporate the words she had given him, nevertheless.

"I am a poor traveler, who appears before you out of the shadow of the past," he replied, looking Pelluria calmly in the eyes.

"Perhaps you will be so good as to tell me whither you are going," continued the Italian, with just the suggestion of a shrug.

"Since I have come out of a shadow, I will go into a shadow," replied Nick; "into the shadow of what is to come."

Again there was that suggestion of a shrug. And Pelluria asked:

"Do you always dwell in the shadow, signore?"

"When I work, Signore Pelluria, I work in the shadow; but when I play, I play in the sunlight."

The men who were grouped around the detective were silent and attentive. It was plainly to be seen that they were greatly impressed by the answers that this stranger among them had made.

Pelluria, too, took a step nearer to the detective, and for a moment he was silent.

But then, as if the question were not an important one, and as if it had just occurred to him to ask it, he said:

"Signore, have you ever visited at Bellini's Home?"

Nick moved forward a step, so that he stood within reach of Pelluria; and it was plain that the Italian shrank backward a little, although he did not move his feet.

"Will you repeat that question?" asked Nick. "I am not sure that I heard it correctly."

"Have you ever visited Bellini's Home?"

Nick Carter's two hands shot out with a motion as quick as the tongue of a toad.

They seized upon Pelluria before that individual could even make an attempt to avoid the attack; and the next instant Nick had raised him high in the air, as he might have done with a small child—and then the detective threw the Italian from him.

So quickly, so dexterously, and so forcibly was the thing done, that before a man there had an opportunity to realize what was happening, Pelluria was sent flying over their heads into the black darkness behind them.

They could hear his body when it struck with a dull thud against the stone wall of the room, and when it fell from there to the earthen floor.

And they also heard him mutter a curse as he scrambled to his feet; for Nick had taken care not to throw him with sufficient violence to injure him.

It was a good shaking up that he wished to give Pelluria—and he got it.

There was an ugly gleam in the Italian's eyes, although he was outwardly smiling, when he scrambled to his feet and returned to the center of the ring; but he stretched forth his hand toward the detective in token of amity, as he murmured in his own language:

"You have done well, Spada. I was sure that I was not mistaken in you."

And Nick Carter smiled as he replied slowly, and with the appearance of hidden meaning:

"I hope to be as well assured that I have not been mistaken in you, Pelluria."

CHAPTER X.

THE COMMITTEE ON ASSASSINATION.

The men who, until now, had surrounded the detective so menacingly, fell back to a respectful distance, and their knives disappeared as if by magic.

The score or more of lights were extinguished also, but were quickly replaced by the glare of a dozen lamps with reflectors, which hung against the walls around the room.

By their aid the detective was able to study his surroundings with more care.

He saw that they were in what must be an extension of the cellar under the big house.

He could see that the men had excavated this room in order to make of it at once a meeting-place and a hiding-place; and he had no doubt that the entrance to it was so well concealed as to defy detection from an ordinary observer.

A man might lie hidden there, indefinitely, while the officers of the law were pursuing him; and they might walk over his head and around about him many times without once suspecting his presence near them.

"You are one of us, Brother Spada," said Pelluria, when order was restored.

Nick shrugged his shoulders and made no answer.

"You are one of us?" repeated Pelluria.

But Nick smiled at him, and did not reply.

Pelluria shrugged his shoulders, and tried again.

"You enjoyed your ride with Signorina Lacava?" he asked.

"Very much, indeed."

"And you discussed—what?"

"Many things, signore."

"She is beautiful."

"Very."

"Charming."

"Exceedingly."

"And the daughter of——"

"Whom?" interrupted the detective sharply.

Pelluria grinned.

"Of her father, signore," he said. And then, as if to change the subject again, he added:

"That was an ugly fall you gave me, Spada."

"I am sorry for that."

"It was deserved."

"I thought so."

"But you will not do it again?"

"Not unless you again offend me."

"You are very strong in your muscles, Spada."

"I am a Spada."

"*Si, signore.* And now I have a few things in which to instruct you."

"I shall be greatly your debtor."

"You will listen?"

"Yes."

"This association is Group A, of the Bronx."

"Yes."

"There are four others in this part of the city."

"Yes."

"Seven in Brooklyn; nine in New York proper; two in Queens, and one in Richmond."

"Twenty-three in all."

"Precisely."

"Thank you."

"May I ask, Spada, if you have business with them all?"

"You may ask, but I may not answer—just yet."

At this moment the door which communicated with the cellar-like room opened to admit no less a personage than Mercodatti; and he came directly forward and extended his hand to the detective.

"I have been told about you," he said.

"Yes?" asked Nick, in reply.

"Permit me to welcome you among us."

"Thank you."

"You have been told that I am the chief here?"

"I have been told as much—but not to-night."

Something very much like a shiver of apprehension stole through Mercodatti's body at the reply, and the detective thought he observed a suggestion of pallor in his countenance; and, observing it, the detective thought to himself:

"This man has done something, or has failed to do something, which he has been ordered to do, which has made him afraid. I wonder what it is? I must find out, if possible."

"Perhaps," said Mercodatti, after a short pause, in which he entirely recovered himself, "perhaps it is possible that I may be able to tell you something which you do not already know."

"That is quite possible," replied the detective.

"This is a regular meeting night."

"Yes."

"The committee on assassination has a report to make—and the committee on extortion will also make its report."

"Very well."

There was a dry-goods box, covered by a red cloth, at one end of the room, and Mercodatti now took up his position behind it. Then he rapped sharply with his knuckles on the box, and instantly there was deathlike stillness in the room, while the men who were assembled there squatted upon the earthen floor, tailor-fashion, and waited expectantly.

"Benvolio Pascarel!" called out Mercodatti; and a giant Italian, beetle-browed and fierce of aspect, slouched forward, and took up a position, standing, directly in front of the cloth-covered box.

"Your report," demanded Mercodatti laconically.

"It is known," replied the man, with a hangdog air, "that the butcher, Singarelli, ignored our frequent petitions to him for money."

"Yes."

"It is known that when he was warned that if he did not comply with our just demands, he would be killed, he called in the police."

"Yes."

"It is known to the brothers here that I was selected to carry out the sentence of death. It is known to you all."

"Yes."

"Singarella is dead."

It was a simple announcement—as if he had stated that the time was two o'clock in the morning; but nevertheless it sent a shudder through Nick Carter as he listened.

But immediately there was a reply, as calmly uttered as the announcement had been.

"We saw the announcement of his death—by emissaries of the Black Hand—in the evening papers," said Mercodatti. "You killed him?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I shot him."

"When, and where?"

"In his shop, this morning, when he was opening for business; before others were near."

"How did you do it?"

"I entered the shop through a back window, and concealed myself behind the refrigerator. I waited there until he came. When he entered, he closed the outer door after him, and locked it. Then he came toward the place where I was concealed. I had to shoot but once."

"Well?"

"He fell dead instantly. I listened. Nobody seemed to have heard the report of the pistol. I waited until I was sure. Then I searched his pockets and the till. I found four hundred and ten dollars. Here it is."

He stepped forward calmly, and laid the money on the box in front of Marcodatti.

"You escaped without being followed?" asked the chief.

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"Yes."

"You have done well."

"Thank you, Mercodatti;" and Benvolio Pascarel returned calmly to his place on the floor.

After a moment of silence, during which a man, who must have been the treasurer, stepped forward and took possession of the money, while each man there made a note of the amount, Mercodatti spoke again.

"The members of the committee on extortion will make a report," he said.

Three men, whose names were not mentioned—who were known to the others, of course, but who were entire strangers to the detective—rose and approached the covered box; and one of them, who must have been the leader of the three, began at once.

"It is three weeks," he said, "since the first message was sent to the banker, Paoli."

"Yes."

"At first he paid no attention."

"We know that."

"A second letter frightened him."

"Yes."

"He went to the police."

"We know that. You were ordered to send one more letter, and if he failed to respond to that within the time specified, he was to be killed."

"Yes. He was given two days in which to respond with one thousand dollars."

"Yes."

"At the end of the time I received the money."

"You have it with you?"

"I have."

The man laid the money on the table, as the other had done before him.

"Did you acknowledge the receipt of the money?" asked Mercodatti.

"Yes; by another letter."

"What did you tell him in that letter?"

"That he would be free from molestation for one more year; but at the end of that time we could call for another thousand—and so on for every year. He was told that as long as he paid the money without question, he would not be harmed, but that if he made any effort to avoid payment, or to put the police on our track, he would be killed without further warning."

"You have done well. Retire."

Again there was a short silence; and then——

"The committee on necessity," called Mercodatti.

Pelluria slowly rose to his feet, and, with a meaning glance toward Nick Carter, which the detective did not at the moment understand, although he was presently to do so, he walked forward and stood before the chief.

"Well?" demanded Mercodatti.

"Mercodatti, there is a banker in Grand Street, by name, Canovia. He has money. He is rich. He has received two warnings, and has ignored them. I suggest that in his case two committees be made into one; that the committee on extortion and on assassination be the same, and that one man shall do all the work in his case."

"It is perhaps a wise suggestion," was the calm reply. "Have you in mind some person who is competent to perform this double duty?"

"I have."

"Then name him."

"Marco Spada, our good friend and brother."

CHAPTER XI.

NICK CARTER IN A TIGHT PLACE.

Mercodatti turned with a smile toward the detective.

"You have heard?" he asked.

The detective nodded his head in the affirmative.

"You will accept?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and nodded again.

"Answer in words, if you please."

"I accept, although I do not recognize your right to appoint me, the first night I am with you."

Mercodatti winced and Pelluria stroked his mustache.

"Bene!" said the latter, under his breath. The expression means "Good!" and Nick knew that he had spoken wisely.

But Mercodatti was evidently disturbed, for, after a moment spent in thought, he said:

"I will appoint Pelluria on the committee with you, to act as your assistant, and under your orders."

The detective turned a smiling face toward Pelluria, and the latter shrank back, as if to dodge it, and there was an evil frown upon his face.

"That fellow would sooner stick a knife into me than to eat a sandwich," thought the detective, "and if I am not on my guard, he will do it, too. For some reason that I do not know, they are both afraid of me. I wonder what it can be?"

As Lucia Bellini had prophesied, there was no suggestion of the taking of an oath.

Much to Nick Carter's surprise, there was no formality at all about the meeting, save those three incidents of calling the meeting to order, receiving the reports of the committees, and appointing a new one.

And the assembly dispersed as it had assembled—quietly and noiselessly.

Singly and in pairs the members of the group slunk away through the darkness, until at last the only ones left in the vaultlike room were Mercodatti, Pelluria, and Nick Carter.

Nick did not like the appearance of this.

He scented trouble in some form, but he had no idea from what source to expect it.

When the others were going out, he also made a move to leave, but Mercodatti met him half-way, with one of those enigmatical smiles of his, and said:

"Pardon, Spada, but you are not in haste?"

"No," replied Nick, pausing.

"Will you not wait for me?"

"Certainly."

"And Pelluria? We all go to the same place, you know."

Nick nodded, and stepped back again to wait.

He had to remain standing, as he had done throughout the meeting, for there was not an article of furniture in the place.

Presently, when all the men were gone save the two who had requested him to wait, Mercodatti stole silently and swiftly toward the big deal door and locked it, putting the key in his pocket.

Then, calmly, but quickly producing a revolver, he pointed it at the detective's head.

"Now, Spada," he said coldly, "you will make an explanation to Pelluria and me, or you will never leave this place alive."

"An explanation of what?" demanded Nick coolly.

"Of your conduct."

"What fault have you to find with my conduct, signores?"

"How is it that you were already a member of our society, and came among us without making the signs? How is it that you know so much, and have told us so little? You are not the stranger that you would have us believe you are."

"You have asked a good many questions, instead of one, it seems to me," replied Nick.

"If I ask a hundred, I shall demand answers to them—if you care to live."

"Bah!" said Nick, with contempt. "Put away that gun. It might go off; and if it did——"

"Well, what if it should?"

"You would regret it."

But Mercodatti did not move. He still held the pistol so that it pointed at the detective's head.

"Answer me," he said. "Answer my questions, or I will kill you."

"You will not kill me," replied the detective coolly, although he was by no means sure of what he said, and he realized that he had never been in greater danger than he was in at that moment. "You will not kill me, because you do not dare; and, if you should, you yourself would be dead twenty-four hours hence."

For an instant Mercodatti wavered.

He permitted his eyes to wander from Nick Carter to the face of Pelluria—and that was precisely the opportunity that Nick Carter sought.

The instant that Mercodatti's eyes were off him, the detective leaped to one side. Both his arms shot out, and, as if by magic, a small short-barreled revolver appeared in either of his hands.

The one in his right hand was discharged at the same instant, and the bullet, true to its aim, knocked the weapon from Mercodatti's hand, and sent it flying across the room, so that the Italian stood disarmed before the man he had threatened.

And Nick's remaining revolver, the one in his left hand, covered Pelluria.

Mercodatti leaped backward with a cry of fright.

For a moment he thought that he was shot—or, at least, that the man before him had meant to shoot him; but Nick said coolly:

"Pick up your gun and put it in your pocket, Mercodatti, and let us have no more of this child's play. Have you threatened me because you think I am some kind of a spy that has come among you?"

"Yes," was the surly reply.

"Then I will assure you that you are mistaken. I know perfectly well that you have reason to fear, but what I know, I do not tell. You are as safe, as far as I am concerned, as you were before you ever saw me—you and your friend Pelluria."

"Then why did you choose to appear so mysteriously among us—and by stealth?"

"Because I had reasons for not caring longer to associate with those whom I left in the shadows of the past. Is that sufficient answer?"

"Yes."

"Are we to have any more of this horse-play?"

"No."

"And you, Pelluria—what say you?"

"I am satisfied."

"Good! Then we will be going."

"It will not be well for us to leave this place together," suggested Pelluria.

"Then you may both leave me here," said Nick. "I will follow you at my leasure."

"No," objected Mercodatti. "You go first. Pelluria will follow after a little. I will go last. I am the chief. It is my command."

"So be it," said Nick; and without another word to either of them, he passed through the door which Mercodatti unlocked for him, followed the corridor to the cellar by the aid of his flash-light, mounted the stairs, and passed out of the house into the open.

"Three o'clock," he mused, glancing at his watch. "I must wait somewhere and discover what these fellows are up to now, for that Mercodatti meditates some sort of mischief this minute I haven't a doubt."

He followed the winding path across the lots to the roadway, and there, espying a tool-house which the department of public works was using in making repairs to the street near there, he quickly picked the lock, entered, closed the door after him, assured in his own mind that he had not been seen in the act.

It required only a moment, with the use of his pocket case of tools, to make a few holes in the boarding of the tool-house, and presently he commanded a clear view of the path down which he had come from the house, for the night was starlit, and there was an arc lamp not far away.

Five minutes after he had ensconced himself in his retreat, he saw Pelluria approaching.

The man came down the path to the street, and paused there, as if in doubt whether he would proceed on his way or not; and then, evidently deciding, he started along rapidly toward the city.

Then ten minutes passed before Mercodatti appeared.

When he reached the roadway, he also stopped; but it was to peer cautiously down the avenue in evident search for the figure of Pelluria.

He stood there for a long time; and then wheeled suddenly, and started off in the opposite direction.

"By Jove!" muttered Nick. "I'll bet a hundred that I know where he is going—and I will bet another that I have guessed the reason why he feared me to-night. He believes that I have been told that he is persecuting Lucia Bellini, and that I have been sent here to interfere—to kill him, perhaps. That accounts for his actions in the cellar to-night, after the others had gone, when he drew the revolver on me.

"I will just follow along after you, friend Mercodatti, and see if I can discover what you are up to."

It was not a difficult matter to follow the Italian, for he seemed to have no idea that he was observed—and Nick took good care to keep well in the shadow, and far enough distant to avoid being heard.

And more, after he had gone a little distance, the detective became so well satisfied that he had guessed correctly, and that the Italian was going to Bellini's house, that he decided to cut across and intercept him.

And so it happened that the detective was at Lucia's house before Mercodatti could get there; and was snugly concealed among the bushes near the side entrance when the Italian arrived.

And now the actions of Mercodatti were something mysterious for a moment.

He did not at first go near the house, but passed on around it, until he was at the rear, and there he placed his fingers in his mouth, and uttered a cry, which was a perfect imitation of a mourning-dove.

Then he waited; and, after a little, a window was raised, and a head appeared in the opening.

"It is I—Mercodatti," said the man outside. "Are you ready for me?"

"Yes, signore," came the reply.

"And Lucia—where is she?"

"I gave her the drug. She is sleeping. She will not awaken. I administered it with her supper, and she is now on her bed, fully dressed. It acted very quickly."

"Good! And the carriage?"

"It is under the shed, back of the stable. Everything is ready."

"Then open the door, and let me inside."

"Would it not be better if I should bring Lucia down to you?"

"Yes. Do so."

The window was closed, and Mercadotti shrank back among the shrubbery; but, even as he did so, a form stole silently up behind him—and then the detective's fist shot out, and caught the Italian directly behind the ear.

He fell like a log, and he did not stir.

That blow had knocked him out as thoroughly as if he had been hit with a hammer.

Nick Carter manacled him, and gagged him, fastening his hands behind his back, and his feet securely together; and then the detective stepped close to the door, which he knew must soon open, and waited.

It was but a few moments that he had to wait. Then he heard the sound of approaching footsteps beyond the door. Then it opened, and in the aperture appeared the man who had done the talking through the window. He was staggering under the weight of the unconscious form of Lucia Bellini.

The detective permitted the man to step outside the house—and then he acted.

Reaching out his left hand, he seized Lucia in his grasp, so that she would not fall to the ground, and at the same instant he delivered a terrible blow with his right upon the point of her abductor's chin.

CHAPTER XII.

CHICK IN THE TORTURE CHAIR.

When Nick Carter entered Mercodatti's restaurant the following morning, about ten o'clock—it was a Sunday morning, remember—the first person whom he encountered was Pelluria.

The latter was visibly uneasy, and he immediately called Nick into the back room.

"Spada," he said, "where is Mercodatti?"

"Is he not here?" asked the detective, with simulated surprise.

"No; he did not return last night."

"So? What could have become of him?"

"Don't you know?"

"I know? How should I know?"

"You, also, did not return."

"No; I have taken rooms at another place. I went there."

"And you did not see Mercodatti after we parted?"

"How should I have seen him? I left before you did. You followed me—or, at least, I supposed you did so."

"Yes; I followed you, but I did not see you."

"Nor I you."

"Mercodatti has disappeared," said Pelluria.

"In that case," replied Nick calmly, "you will be chief, Pelluria. You have most to gain by his disappearance."

"Spada, tell me the truth. Have you killed him? Were you sent here to kill him?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders, and turned away.

"You do not talk now like a man who is fit to be the chief of our group," he said contemptuously; but what the detective could have told him, if he had cared to do so, was that, at that moment, Mercodatti was a prisoner in Nick Carter's house, taken there by Ten-Ichi, for whom the detective had telephoned after he had driven the carriage, with its unconscious occupants, to a safe distance from the scene described in the last chapter; and that Lucia Bellini was also there—an honored guest, and that her father had been apprised of all that had happened, and had sworn himself to silence.

Later in the day, Pelluria again approached the detective.

"Spada," he said, "the mystery is a mystery no longer; and now, if I find Mercodatti, you will not have to kill him, for I will do it myself."

"Indeed! Why?"

"He has abducted Lucia Lacava, whose real name is——"

"Hush!"

"With the aid of a servant, he has stolen her away. All three have disappeared."

"Is it so? Well, let them go."

And now it becomes our duty to skip rather lightly over a week of time, for during that week nothing of moment happened to the detective.

He employed the time merely in ingratiating himself farther and more deeply into the confidences of his Black-Hand associates—and he succeeded perfectly.

The banker, Canovia, who was to be made a victim of their machinations, and against whose peace of mind and life itself Nick Carter had been named as the committee of one, he did not molest; but what he did do was to turn into the society one thousand dollars in cash—the amount that was to be demanded of Canovia—representing that the banker had been an easy mark, and had "given up" at once. But it was Nick's own money that he used, for he knew that he would get it back again.

It made him solid, though, with his new associates.

Another thing he did was to establish Chick as an Italian banker, and then to spread the intelligence agreed upon between them, where it would do the most good.

And during that time, also, he had several personal talks over the private telephone with the commissioner, one of which we will repeat.

It happened a week to a day after the first announcement that he had arrived on the scene of operations, and was as follows:

"That you, commissioner?"

"Yes."

"I shall be ready for you next Monday night."

"So soon?"

"Oh, it is only one group—and not the worst one, at that; but it is something."

"How many?"

"Eighteen, all told."

"Will you catch them red-handed?"

"Yes; the whole bunch."

"Tell me about it."

"Chick has been playing the banker. He is reputed to be very rich, but, although threatened, he has refused to 'give up.'"

"I see."

"So the Black Hand has decided, at my suggestion, to depart from its usual methods. They are to capture Chick, and take him a prisoner to their retreat, a complete plan of which you will receive through the mail in the morning."

"All right."

"You are to send a squad of fifteen men to the vicinity of that house, so they will arrive there precisely at two in the morning. The plan and directions mailed to you to-night will inform you exactly what they are to do, and I wish the instructions carried out without deviation."

"They shall be."

"Then, all will go well. Now, one thing more."

"Yes."

"It is the plan to torture the banker—Chick."

"Yes."

"The torturing will begin exactly at two, and I will be the master of ceremonies."

"Pleasant occupation, that."

"You are to descend upon us like an avalanche. There will be a good many shots fired. No doubt somebody may get hurt, but I will have seen to it that most of the Italians' weapons are loaded with blanks. You are to capture the whole bunch. You will appear to treat me with great severity, as being the ringleader, and you will make me a prisoner with the others, and finally have me assigned to a cell with a man named Pelluria."

"All right."

"That is all. Good night."

* * * * * * *

Again we are looking into the cellar where Nick Carter was taken when he became a member of the Black Hand; but this time the scene is somewhat different.

The time was, to be exact, ten minutes of two o'clock in the morning.

In the very center of the subterranean room, a man—and it was Chick, disguised as an Italian banker—was bound firmly in a chair, and beside him was a portable forge and bellows, with a hot fire glowing among the coals, and with a swarthy Italian working the blower.

There were half-a-dozen irons, with their black ends protruding from the coals—but the other ends of them were almost white-hot already.

Directly in front of the supposed banker stood Nick

Carter, in his character of Marco Spada, and around him were grouped the seventeen members of that group of the Black Hand.

Nick Carter was speaking, and his remarks were addressed to the man who was bound to the chair, while the others hung upon his words with an absorbed interest which, under the circumstances, was frightful to behold.

"You have been brought here," said the supposed Spada, "in order that you may be convinced that we are not trifling. Beside you is the heated forge. In it are irons that are now at a white heat. You have been requested to give us the sum of ten thousand dollars. Will you do so, and spare yourself needless suffering?"

"No; never!"

The detective looked at his watch.

"I will wait three minutes," he said calmly. "It will then be exactly two o'clock. If by that time you do not consent, I will burn a deep scar upon your left cheek. If you are still obdurate, then one on your right cheek. If you still refuse, I will then burn out one of your eyes—then the other—and so on until you die from your sufferings. Do you hear me, dog?"

"Yes; and I refuse!"

Nick turned to the others.

"Have I your consent to act?" he asked.

And, with one voice, they replied: "You have."

He stepped forward, and took one of the irons from the fire, and held it aloft.

But, even as he did so, there was a loud crash behind them all, and at the same instant the heavy deal door fell into the room.

For one instant the occupants of the vault were too astonished to move; and, during that instant, the room became filled with blue-coated policemen, as if by magic.

Then the Italians acted.

They leaped to their feet, as with one accord, and the place was filled with the din of exploding firearms, and with powder smoke.

Some of the Italians leaped forward, and essayed to fight the officers, hand to hand, but they were quickly felled with clubs of the policemen. Knives were drawn, but as quickly knocked from disabled hands.

Nick Carter pretended to pit himself against two policemen, but permitted himself to be quickly overpowered and borne to the earthen floor; and the police captain leaped forward, and liberated the man in the chair.

And thus Nick Carter fought and won his first fight against the Black Hand, a fight that was only just begun, as the reader will understand; but Mercodatti was taken to another prison than that to which the others of the Black Hand were conducted; and Lucia was liberated from Nick Carter's house, and permitted to return to the home of her father.

THE END.

The next number of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY will be entitled "The Black Hand's Nemesis; or, One Against a Hundred and One." And it will describe how the great detective finally rooted out the terrible society entirely, leaving only a few so-called Black-Hand members to carry on their awful work of blackmail and death.

About the Early Numbers of **Tip Top Weekly**

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print.

We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays."

We give herewith a complete list of all the stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored cover catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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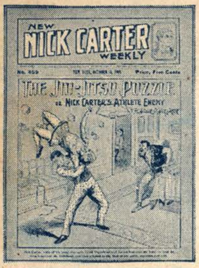
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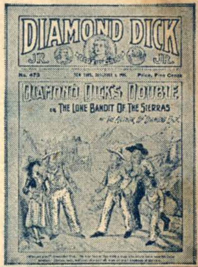
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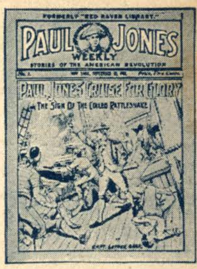
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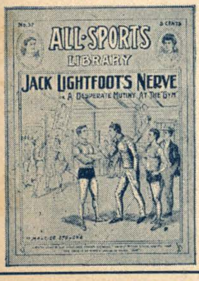
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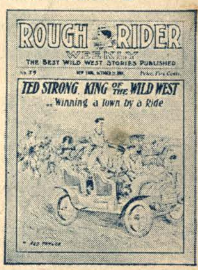
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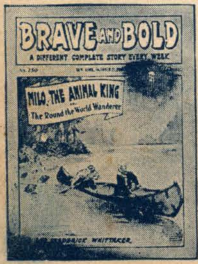
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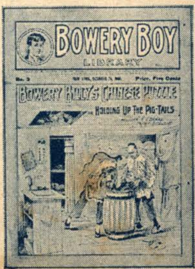
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